

Thursday 1 February 2001

## TERRAIN VAGUE - JOAN FONTCUBERTA

Beverley Art Gallery, East Riding of Yorkshire

**John Hudson**

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**Joan Fontcuberta produces works that resemble paintings; grattages, frottages, decalcomania or the hand printed solvent transfers that feature in the works of Robert Rauschenberg.**

On closer inspection we observe that they are large format black and white photograms that bring together elements of photomontage and straightforward photography. These pictures are made in the darkroom using these combined techniques to produce semiabstract images.

The pictures mix photographic images of buildings and solarised industrial landscapes with mechanical objects floating over the representational to create a photomontage effect. A mangled mess of wires in what seems to be a whole photogram, actually overlaps an obscured industrial scene in a tangled web of the natural and manmade. X-ray images of circuits and valves float in industrial smoke and sometimes jostle for space with newsprint splashed across the sky above what looks like a contemporary industrial landscape.

In these works we are confronted by visual puzzles where we find clues. The newsprint that appears in a bleak sky turns out to be the headlines from a local Sheffield newspaper. From these clues of objects and printed material I sense a curiosity into the death of Britain's industrial base.

The artist is acting in the role of archaeologist, making recordings and collecting artefacts, scouring wasteland in the North of England, scraping away the dirt to find traces of the past. He discovers various objects that include cogs, wires, pipes, valves and pistons. The wire used in a number of the photograms at first resembles the effects of action painting. In context it may represent a freeze frame of light in motion or a ghost like image of sparks from a factory furnace that once blazed and spat molten metal. Are we meant to be nostalgic of these relics from some golden

age of manufacturing? Of course now this country does not have a traditional manufacturing base; it is now replaced by the creative industry of which Fontcuberta is a part, or the new virtual industries that dominate our lives and mainly exist apart from the physical world.

Moholy-Nagy in his photograms and montages seems to celebrate the industrial and mechanical. In contrast, despite the use of similar photographic techniques, Fontcuberta could be mourning the loss of the industrial and the traditional communities through the scouring of its ruins in these urban twilight zones. He also could be expressing criticism of the industrial revolution's effect on nature, since nature encroaches on industry's ruins and reclaims the wasteland in many of the images. From further observation we sense a feeling of distance between the artist and his subject, which is exacerbated by the use of a combination of photographic techniques, which are mainly produced in the darkroom, away from the environment that fascinates him. Ultimately, these works exist at the interface, between nature and industry, the real and the virtual and the taking and making of visual images.

**Beverley Art Gallery**

**Champney Road**

**Beverley East Riding of Yorkshire**

**Tel: (01482) 883903**

**Until 18 March 2001**